

LAKOU: HAITIAN IDENTITY IN HOUSING

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The structure of a home relates not only to functional and economic considerations, but also to the history and culture of its users. A house can illustrate the identity of a people.

Haiti took its independence on January 1, 1804 as the first Black republic in the world and as the second free country in the Western Hemisphere after the United States. Its identity has been formed through a long struggle against slavery and colonialism.

Haitian identity is defined by the relationship between land and liberty. The question of land ownership was the first concern after the birth of the nation. Freedom did not only mean the abolition of slavery, but also addressing the redistribution and possession of land. Since the first revolt in 1791 the revolutionary ideal was “render the land to the ones who use it.” It is in this context that lakou emerged.

Lakou is a community space composed of houses populated by several generations of one family. The homes are surrounded by a circular garden.

A patriarchal organization, the met lakou (usually the oldest living male family member) is the owner of the land. The process of familial inheritance signifies the land’s indivisibility. Selling a piece of land is a sign of economic difficulty.

The garden of lakou is the basic unit of the Haitian agricultural world. The family cultivates the necessary foods for consumption by working together. Seasonal harvests from the garden allow the family to not be entirely dependent on outside resources. During the first years of independence Haiti was inflicted with embargos from Europe and the United States, so this agricultural self-reliance extended outward from the family to the entire nation.

Lakou is also a sacred space where family members undertake intimate relationships with the spirit of lakou, one of the God’s in the Voudou religion, the African component of Haitian identity. The garden surrounding the house is enclosed to define private ownership and mystic dimension of the space. Strangers are advised not to pick fruit or cross the gardens of others without authorization because



this may provoke the maleficent spirit of lakou. The spirit plays a double role of protector and avenger. All three major religions: Catholicism, Protestantism, and Voudou respect this sacred space and gardens are cultivated according to religious rituals.

The stability and security from the garden allows individuals to accept or refuse work, this choice alleviating some of the danger of exploitation. Lakou is an ethical expression of free workers who are masters of their time and bodies. The dream of every Haitian is to have a piece of land. Owning land is linked to the very idea of being Haitian because of the land is a symbol of freedom.

The decline of the agricultural autonomy in the rural Haitian space due to many factors too numerous to list here. For the last few decades, people streamed from the countryside to urban areas in search of educational opportunities and work. Sprawling shantytowns without order and comfort are the common image of everyday life in Haiti. Since the earthquake many people have sought refuge in their ancestral homes outside of



the cities. Unfortunately, the traditions of lakou have lost almost all potential to welcome them.

The movement for reconstruction must bring reparation to the damaged Haitian identity. It is not enough to rebuild structures. Rebuilding efforts must consider the extensive environmental and economic questions facing Haiti and the entire region. Haiti set an example to the world as a pioneer nation of a whole people from slavery to national freedom. Attention must be paid to the deep cultural importance of the land in this struggle.

Once Haiti achieved independence, the new country offered a home to all of those suffering in the Caribbean and Latin America. Today, paradoxically, it is the Haitian population who are seeking shelter. Housing must bring sanctuary, stabilization and hope to the dispersed population.